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HHS ISSUES GUIDELINES FOR SAFEGUARDING BUILDING VENTILATION SYSTEMS FROM TERRORIST ATTACKS

The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) today released new guidelines for protecting ventilation systems in commercial and government buildings from chemical, biological and radiological attacks. The guidelines provide recommendations that address the physical security of ventilation systems, airflow and filtration, systems maintenance, program administration and maintenance staff training.

"These guidelines offer practical advice to building owners, managers and maintenance staffs on the steps they can take to protect their ventilation systems," said HHS Secretary Tommy G. Thompson. "This new guidance is an example of the many steps we have taken since last fall's terrorist attacks to strengthen our capabilities to protect public health."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) in HHS prepared the guidelines with input and review by the Office of Homeland Security's (OHS) Interagency Workgroup on Building Air Protection and more than 30 other federal agencies, state and local organizations and professional associations.

"This guidance offers reasonable and practical measures to reduce the likelihood of a contaminant attack and to minimize the impact if one occurs," said OHS Director Tom Ridge. "This effort demonstrates how the federal government and the private sector can work together to make our nation more secure."

The guidelines are intended as a first step with the professional community, government agencies, and others toward developing more comprehensive guidance for protecting building ventilation systems. The guidelines recommend that security measures be adopted for air intakes and return-air grilles, and that access to building operations systems and building design information should be restricted. The information also recommends that the emergency capabilities of systems' operational controls should be assessed, filter efficiency should be closely evaluated, buildings' emergency plans should be updated, and preventive maintenance procedures should be adopted. The document also cautions against detrimental actions, such as permanently sealing outdoor air intakes.

According to the guidelines, protective measures should be tailored to fit the individual building based on several factors, including the perceived risk associated with the building and its tenants, engineering and architectural feasibility, and cost.